

Entrepreneurially Adjusting to a New ‘Visual’ Music Genre in Japan - A Case Study.

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Abstract

Many foreign musicians have tried to enter the Japanese music market with varying success, but except for the global superstar category, most have found it difficult due to language, culture, musical tastes and other reasons. This paper traces, in a narrative style, case research involving a Queensland roots musician (8 Ball Aitken) and the exporting of his live music to Japan. The paper uncovers an interesting overlap between an identified new ‘visual’ genre there and the style, persona and performance of this artist, and notices that this is partly fortuitous and partly the result of a skilful entrepreneurial adjustment set of strategies by the artist and his wider management team.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the entrepreneurial marketing adjustment of Australian roots musician 8 Ball Aitken, in terms of his entry strategy into the Japanese music market. The pragmatic purpose therein is to potentially assist other Australian musicians in tailoring their visual marketing to suit the Japanese market. The academic purpose was to briefly assess the wider implications for marketing. By way of some background, since representing Queensland in Japan during the Queensland Premier’s 2005 Kansai Exchange, 8 Ball Aitken has commenced building music industry networks within Japan. In this capacity, he acted as a youth/cultural envoy, representing Queensland at local government and prefectural government levels. He has now been booked by Japanese promoters San Entertainment to perform at the 2006 Kyoto Film Festival, working closely with the Japanese and Australian offices of Austrade and the Queensland Office of State Development. Throughout the course of a nine month residency at Johnno’s Blues Bar, a major international roots music venue in Cairns, Queensland, Japanese attendance at 8 Ball Aitken’s gigs increased dramatically, starting with approximately 15% of the nightly audience, and increasing to over 45% after 6 months (statistics collected at door by Phoenix Movement Records, the artist’s record label.) The musician was hired by the venue one night a week to run a target-marketed Japanese backpackers music night with 8 Ball Aitken as the featured weekly entertainer. Japanese expatriate publications (‘Living In Cairns’ Magazine and a Japanese backpacker website) ran stories on the musician. The recognition Aitken received in Cairns preceded him to Japan.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Japan is one of Australia’s major trading partners, yet the export of Australian roots music to Japan has not yet been a resounding success compared with wine, or raw materials. Statistics shown on the ABS website show that wine exports have risen 633% from 1991-2001 and the growth in the exports of raw materials has been 61% in the same time. However, the export trade in music to Japan is not yet of a significant quantity for statistics to be collected (ABS 2006). With the exception of John Butler, few Australian roots acts have made any significant impact on the Japanese music market. However, based on attendance figures derived from the Phoenix Movement Records fan database, visiting Japanese tourists and expatriate Japanese nationals exhibit some positive responses to roots music presented within Australia (Jensen 2006). 8 Ball Aitken, an Australian roots musician, has been experimentally trialling different possible marketing strategies which could be specific to addressing Japanese consumer sensibilities.

Literature Review

An examination of related literature has yielded some supporting information which is applicable to this study. Roots music is described as “often a genre-specific term, being most frequently used in relation to styles such as folk, the blues, and various world musics. It is also often a constituent of populist notions of authenticity”. (Shuker, 2005:236) In this context, the marketing of contemporary Australian roots music in Japan is an important aspect of the trans-cultural nature of the global marketing of world music.

According to Taylor (1997:xvi) “All of these theoretical insights usefully recognize that the world has changed dramatically in the past few decades, that the ever-increasing global flow of capital and cultural forms are providing people virtually everywhere with new ways of looking at and living in the world. These and other theories present new models and call for jettisoning or rethinking older ones. Ideas of ethnicity, identity, subject position, and economic cores and peripheries are being examined in productive ways that are attempting to keep up with the complexity of life on the ground.” Thus Taylor poses the possibility that, in a fluid global world, the concept of a fixed genre categorisation, with cultures and sub-cultures placed in one of these ‘boxes’, may need some adjustment.

With regard to entrepreneurial international marketing, Lathrop advocates developing overseas music markets as a vital priority. “The reward for developing a worldwide marketing program can be very significant, even for an independent label: in the case of the blues label Alligator Records, for example, 10 to 20 percent of its business comes from international sales. Music – the so-called international language – is especially well-suited for selling all over the world.” (Lathrop, 2003:241)

The market for popular music from Western cultures in Japan is discussed by De Launey. While he states that “Japan is now the world’s second largest market for music, accounting for 13.3 per cent of world music sales”, he also infers that Western (including Australian) artists are facing two major challenges in gaining a foothold in the Japanese market. “There are two kinds of problems which are currently hindering efforts by Western pop music to re-establish itself in Japan. One kind is practical, relating to such factors as the channels through which Western pop music can gain exposure in Japan. The other relates to the attitudes, preconceptions, and habits of Japanese music listeners.” (De Launey, 1995:211)

Methodology

The methodology employed in the study is an adaptation of the case research method (Yin 2002) involving a series of in-depth interviews with the artist himself, as well as three key individuals working within the framework of exporting 8 Ball Aitken’s Australian roots music to Japan. These three individuals have all lived and worked in Japan for extended periods of time, and they are actively involved as professionals employed by the Australian and Queensland governments in the marketing and export of Australian music to Japan. Contact was initially made with these key individuals to determine that they would take part in the survey. A questionnaire was developed and emailed to the participants, and follow up telephone calls clarified the data. The respondents were then contacted once their interviews had been compiled or transcribed, and their interview was read back to them verbatim. Their final approval was then sought in regard to the inclusion of their responses in the study. The respondents’ answers to the questionnaire were analysed alongside observations in different Japanese environments, together with a review of the existing literature. This study is presented in a narrative style because of its richness. The methodology was in accordance with Yin’s case research procedure emphasizing that good “data analysis consists of

examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study" (Yin 2002, 34).

Uncovering a New ‘Visual’ Music Genre

As an eclectic musician and person, 8 Ball Aitken has been conscious of the need to be entrepreneurial, both here and overseas, and thus has been willing to observe new markets very carefully. He opens the case study discussion with an explanation of his Japanese export efforts within a contemporary Australian roots music context:

“In Japan, I felt like I was expected to be a super-hero whenever playing music. The faster and more animated the song it seemed the more that they liked it. I felt like a major rock star – children stared at me as if hypnotized, and wanted to touch my beard and long red hair on the street. It was as though they had to check if I was really there and if I was an actual human.” Aitken commented that innovative costuming defined his cultural and national origins to the Japanese: “The costuming was very effective. I wore colour-coordinated outfits, mostly based on brightly coloured suits (purple and orange.) I accessorised these in monochrome, or colours from the same category, which is a popular African-American roots look. All my shirts, ties, and even socks matched my suits. I also wore colour-coordinated cowboy outfits for less formal occasions. Many Japanese people that I met said they thought I looked like an Australian from the outback. It was important (as a first tour in Japan) to give them a point of reference. They reacted really positively to my cowboy clothes, as it seemed they took me as the real deal – straight off of the back of a horse from the outback. It probably helps that I have a farming background – my grandfather is still a working cattleman, age 80 – so I am confident about my own authenticity. The clothes give my performance the best point of reference, and spoke for my music.” In terms of performance, Aitken notes that a lively presentation made a significant impact on his Japanese audiences, as did the unique appearance and sound of his steel guitar: “My stage show consisted of lots of wild enthusiastic antics that seemed to give the Japanese audiences the impression that I was a wild man, straight from the outback and that I was somehow crazy. They seemed to really enjoy my percussive slide guitar playing and foot-stomping on the stomp-box, and they listened attentively to the lyrics, which they probably couldn’t understand in full. In my onstage banter at a Japanese show, I always make sure that I use as much local slang and polite Japanese words as possible, in order to show the audience that I respect them, and that I am giving the Japanese language my best shot. These attitudes help in making the audience receptive of the music that you are trying to sell them. As a ‘gaijin’, (foreigner), who is trying to break into the Japanese market I found that being seen playing koto, eating (and enjoying) Japanese food, taking part in their cultural activities (Danjiri Matsuri – a rural harvest festival held in Kumatori) as well as being interested in their culture helped me to build bridges and form relationships with people. This respect was what I was trying to express to my Japanese audiences. I made a point of learning to play some koto (a type of horizontally-plucked harp) and shamisen (a banjo-like instrument). I have since acquired a shamisen, and am now making a point of playing this professionally when my audiences include expatriate Japanese people.”

C.L., an Australian government trade business development manager based in Japan, is responsible for the Japanese promotion of Australian entertainment content and identification of opportunities for Australian musicians in Japan. Her view is that significantly more work needs to be done within the Australian industry in order to assist with further brand development of Australian roots music as a recognised genre in Japan:

“To date, there hasn't been any significant ‘image building work’ done in this field [in Japan regarding Australian roots music] at all. Brand-building activities centred on this could assist but in spite of many devotees, roots is still not yet mainstream. A Japanese language specific [web] site, if well done, could certainly assist with this. Audiences at recent John Butler concerts [in Japan] would suggest [a demographic age spread from] anywhere from early twenties through to early fifties. [The] support band was a local Japanese ‘roots’ style band in their mid twenties. Guitar skills are highly valued, as is previous commercial success in the US, or major success in Australia. A coordinated [media] attack from all sides would be best. But without music being readily available in the market, often it is extremely difficult to raise the interest of promoters. Tapping into an existing database of fans of roots in general and targeting them first would assist. A really high profile within Australia is usually vital for success. The exception to this is if an artist is based here, and can build a very visual profile locally through live street performances, etc., to raise interest”.

Ken Kikkawa is a Japanese citizen, currently working in Queensland as the Business Manager (North Asia), within the Queensland Office of State Development. He works with Australian musicians, including 8 Ball Aitken, who are exporting their music to Japan:

“There is not necessarily much interest in Japan regarding Australian roots music yet, because they don't know Australian music at all. Also, country music is not that popular in Japan at the moment; maybe the Australian identity is a bit weak, apart from the very visual Aboriginal culture. In regard to market segmentation, I think you can view Japan as one market that has different segments. You couldn't say that Osaka is more jazz oriented than Tokyo, for example, or that Tokyo is more rock oriented than Osaka. Appeal [to different demographics] really depends on the musician's look and sound. For example, 8 Ball is very good looking, and might have a chance to appeal to younger generations with his costumes, who like pop, rock, and gothic. It's not just sound, but performance and looks are very important in Japan. For example, there is a special Japanese genre of music called ‘visual’ that is very much based on glam and Seventies heavy metal, with very colourful, wild hairstyles. I wouldn't recommend [Australian musicians] wearing just jeans or normal country clothes [when touring Japan]. I would like to see them wearing glamorous, colourful clothes. The visual image is very important to attract a Japanese audience. It is important to wear a very fashionable outfit on the street, especially in trendy places like Shinjuku, Shibuya, and Harajuku.”

Evaluating the inroads made by Australian acts which have developed a long-term commercial presence within Japan, Kikkawa sums up the relevant qualities which have helped to establish their market-share:

“[In terms of Australian acts popular in Japan], Olivia Newton-John [is important for her] sound and looks, although I thought she was from America until recently. Men At Work [was significant] because of their unique sound and look, [it was] something different. A look and unique sound is the most important factor. Underground gothic is big in Japan right now. Fashion can relate to performance; funny [extreme] movements help. The ‘visual’ genre is big, as is anything related to movies; maybe the cowboy fashion trend [in Japan] relates to Brokeback Mountain. Once you crack the market, you can pull your own style. Maybe you allow yourself to do something funny. The sound has to be something different, something new, something different that they [Japanese audiences] haven't heard before, possibly linked to movies. It's hard for them to understand lyrics [in English], so sound is very important. Any TV appearances are important, and telling jokes is good. Appearance is important to

make a difference from others. That's why 'visual' has become such an important genre within the Japanese marketplace."

Austrade Export Advisor Ian Brazier lived and worked in Japan for twelve years, including a stint as the Australian Consul and Trade Commissioner in Nagoya. He has been assisting with the development of 8 Ball Aitken's marketing strategy since 2005. Brazier gives his personal opinion of the current 'state of play' for Australian roots music in Japan thus: "Australian roots music is reasonably well known in Japan by a small minority, nearly the same size audience that enjoys jazz. Japan is however the second biggest market in the world for jazz, so maybe roots can be too. What's peculiar about Australian roots music in particular is that there is a huge didgeridoo following in Japan. There is a strong interest in [contemporary] Australian among the age 20 to 30 alternative crowd. Non-suit wearing youth are into this. A didgeridoo makes an act instantly marketable, and instantly recognisable, as Australian."

In terms of developing publicity networks, Brazier contends that Japan's digital marketplace is better developed than current Australian models. Coupling SMS based messaging strategies with image development is suggested: "[The best way to communicate to Japanese audiences is via] e-mail outs. In fact, internet based marketing in Japan is much more advanced than it is in Australia, particularly via text messaging. It's good to get a hardcore fan base doing your advance PR work. Just starting to play at the core venues will reach mainstream audiences eventually, beginning with smaller audiences at genre specific venues. The 'character/look' an artist presents is important, that strong visual identity. 8 Ball's visual identity is pretty strong. You don't want it to go completely over the top, but I think 8 Ball has it at the right extreme." According to Brazier, an additional (and highly significant) Japanese marketing aspect is often overlooked by Australian musicians. Composing songs with karaoke potential, including choreography and other visual imagery with a live performance, and creating more musically-sophisticated material are all options available to Australians planning to access the Japanese market as original roots performers.

'Visual Esperanto' in International Marketing

It is probably not surprising that a new 'visual' music genre is popular in Japan. In the Japanese context we have seen that, because of language, cultural and other factors, acts are prized for their visual distinctiveness. Irrespective of cross-cultural considerations, the power of the visual is well established socially, psychologically and educationally. In addition, Clow and Baack (2007:219) classify "visual consistency as their top principle of effective advertising ...to help fix the brand in consumers' minds... and often lead to more favorable attitudes". They add (169 & 170): "Visual imagery is especially important in international marketing. Global advertising...tries to create what is called 'visual Esperanto' which recognizes that visual images are more likely to transcend cultural differences." Solomon (2007:281) adds to this by documenting the evidence that "heightened vividness is better at commanding attention and more strongly embedding into memory".

Conclusion

While it is clear that artists must attempt to pursue the process of developing mainstream recognition within their home/Australian marketplace, (as deemed highly significant to Japanese audience acceptance by C.L. and Kikkawa). The entrepreneurial musician in this paper has also strongly invested in his visual image development for the Japanese market. The interviewees infer that identifying and then skilfully adjusting to this 'visual genre' is a

significant step forward, and should be incorporated into a Japanese roots music marketing strategy. Ian Brazier and C.L both recommend that a strong digital marketing presence, either by way of a website or SMS messages, would help facilitate increased Japanese exposure which in turn would benefit his career. A physical presence in Japan is recommended to build up a fan base. The musician needs to be seen in culturally significant areas displaying this strong and distinctive visual identity.

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